

Remarks by Congresswoman Betty McCollum  
InterAction  
November 19, 2008

Good afternoon.

Sam, thank you and InterAction for inviting me here today and for the excellent work product you and your member NGOs have produced.

InterAction and its 170 member organizations are working tirelessly to partner with the U.S. government to meet the world's poor and most vulnerable people. InterAction is a strong voice in the halls of Congress for sound foreign affairs policy and funding, while their member NGOs are on the ground putting U.S. foreign assistance to work to meet the development and humanitarian needs of people around the world.

You have been great partners to Congress.

Sam, I commend you and your team for producing this comprehensive document of pressing international development and humanitarian issues. This Presidential Transition Foreign Assistance Briefing Book is a tremendous resource for policy makers, especially as we look to develop a 21st century foreign assistance program.

Secretary of Defense Robert Gates has argued that integration is essential because military power alone would not win the battles of the 21st Century. He said one of the most important lessons the military has learned in Iraq and Afghanistan is that foreign assistance strategies such as development, humanitarian crisis intervention and post-conflict reconstruction must be central to U.S. efforts to achieve global security and regain the mantle of American leadership around the world.

A new generation of challenges, including pandemic disease, poverty, climate change and food insecurity are on the rise, requiring immediate attention and substantial resources.

The incoming Obama Administration and the member of the 111th Congress are facing tremendous economic and fiscal challenges here at home. There will be pressure to focus domestically and put foreign assistance on the back burner.

This would be a mistake.

The challenges and threats facing the American people from every corner of the world will not go away if we ignore them. We must re-engage the world in a constructive, focused manner. We must re-establish America's leadership role in the world – by our actions as well as our words.

Foreign assistance is essential to confront humanitarian crises, development opportunities and expanding bilateral and multilateral cooperation on global problems.

The system by which U.S. foreign assistance is delivered needs reform.

For resource levels to be sustained, Congress must have confidence that tax dollars will be invested in a focused, effective, efficient and transparent manner with measurable outcomes. We need to meet emergency needs – like Darfur and Congo – but we must also take a longer view of development and invest in reducing child and maternal mortality, expanding agricultural production so people can feed themselves, and prepare poor countries to meet the challenges brought on by global climate change.

While foreign assistance often represents an effective option for achieving America's global goals, our policies and programs must be revamped. Our foreign assistance model is outdated and under-achieving.

I strongly support expanding our government's capacity by increasing the number of American diplomats and development workers around the world.

I strongly support establishing a cabinet level department of development to act as an independent partner along with defense and diplomacy in our national security strategy.

U.S. foreign aid needs a comprehensive modernization to increase accountability and improve results. Modernization will make Americans safer, help our investments abroad go farther. While a smarter national strategy is essential, it will only be achieved with broad support in Congress and strong leadership from the new Administration.

In the 111th Congress, I believe we will have 49 new Member in the House and a handful of new Senators with limited foreign policy experience. This briefing book will provide new members with a critical introduction the international challenges facing the U.S. and issues they will be voting on in the months ahead.

As always, I am impressed and grateful for the work of InterAction and their member NGOs. They have produced an important resource to help the new Congress and our new President prepare to take on the vital foreign assistance and humanitarian work of the U.S. government.

Sam, once again, thank you having me here today.